

17th May 2021

Morte

**“Look to this day,
For it is the very life of life.”**

Kalidasa, 5th century classical Sanskrit poetry

A few days ago, I killed a pheasant on a country road. I wasn't speeding, and the road was clear. But all of a sudden, a pheasant shot out from a thicket, right into my path. I had no time to take evasive action. As I looked in my rear-view mirror, the pheasant lay motionless on the grass-verge.

I had killed a pheasant on a country road. I didn't mean to, of course. It came on me by surprise and there was nothing I could do. But the result was a dead pheasant, and a very shaken and emotional driver.

The purpose of my journey was to visit a friend to have a chat in her garden. I was grateful for a moment or two to gather my thoughts while she went indoors to rustle up the coffee. As I sat the sunshine, I pondered what had happened. And, as I did so, an old Gregorian Chant came to mind: *Media vita in morte sumus*. The full English translation in the *Book of Common Prayer* puts it poetically in this form:

*In the midst of life, we are in death,
of whom may we seek for succour ...
O Lord God most holy, O Lord most mighty ...
deliver us not into the bitter pains of eternal death.*

I never got on to the “God” bit. I was stuck with my reality on that morning: in the midst of life, we are in death – pheasants and all.

Then I became conscious of a cacophony of birdsong around me. Which birds? I have no idea. But their songs spoke to me of life, so that, by the time my friend returned with the coffee, a balance had begun to return to my troubled soul. Birds were singing ... Or the voice of God?

I don't know if there's a Gregorian Chant which begins *Medio mortis in vita sumus* – “In the middle of death we are in life” – but that was God's word to me that morning. Death is a given. But the gift of life embraces even death itself. It offers us “the very life of life” which the ancient Sanskrit promises – even to a driver on a country road who'd just killed a pheasant.

A prayer for today

Inevitable though it is, death can still take us by surprise. But let us not be surprised when the gift of life embraces it and offers us hope again. Amen.